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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, S/CT, SA/INS, INR/NESA

NSC FOR E. MILLARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/08/14

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#) [NO](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: Sri Lanka: Ignoring orders of LTTE leadership, rebel commander remains ensconced in east

Refs: (A) Ops Center - Colombo 03/08/2004 telecon

- (B) FBIS Reston Va DTG 060831Z Mar 04
- (C) Oslo 419
- (D) Colombo 387, and previous

(U) Classified by Charge'd'Affaires James F. Entwistle.  
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: The main Tamil Tiger organization in the north announced March 6 that it was replacing a dissident commander. The commander, Karuna, has refused to step down, however, and remains ensconced in his eastern jungle base. No violence has been reported, but the situation is becoming increasingly tense in the east. The GSL has indicated that it has no plans to deal directly with Karuna despite his requests that it do so. In the meantime, the campaign for the April 2 parliamentary elections proceeds apace in the rest of the country. Karuna's split from the main LTTE organization appears to be the most serious internal crisis ever faced by the group. If there is no resolution to the situation, there will almost certainly be complications for the peace track down the road. END SUMMARY.

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LTTE Acts to replace Rebel Commander

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2. (U) The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have reacted to eastern military commander Karuna's recent moves to separate his command from the main organization (see Ref D). On March 6, LTTE Political chief S.P. Thamilchelvam, speaking at a press conference held in the northern LTTE-controlled town of Kilinochchi, announced that Karuna had been removed from his position. An official statement posted on the pro-Tiger website "TamilNet" explained the decision in the following (choppy) manner:

"Mr. Karuna, who was commander of Batticaloa-Ampara, instigated by some malicious elements opposed to the Tamil Eelam liberation struggle, acting traitorously to the Tamil people and the Tamil Eelam national leadership, has planned to secede himself from the liberation organization. The commanders, divisional heads and cadres under him unable to acquiesce with his traitorous act have refused to comply with his orders and met with the national leadership, and explained the ground reality prevailing there. In accordance with this, Karuna has been discharged from the Liberation Tiger organization and relieved from official responsibilities."

3. (U) The LTTE statement went on to name Ramesh (formerly Karuna's deputy) as "special commander" of the Batticaloa/Ampara sector, Karuna's former political adviser Kaushlyan was retained as political head, and two other cadre, Ram and Prabha, were named as commander and deputy commander respectively. Speaking at the press conference following the announcement of Karuna's expulsion from the Tigers, Ramesh stated "the decision Karuna has made is his own. He has not discussed this with the leadership. The commanders, officials, and fighters do not accept the decisions he has made on his own." Joining in the wave of criticism of Karuna was former Batticaloa/Ampara Tiger political head Karikalan, who was quoted by TamilNet as stating: "Karuna will be seen as a Pol Pot if he continues to act irresponsibly towards our people." Thamilchelvam was also quoted as stating, "our leader is always ready to provide amnesty to those who realize their mistakes and I have high hopes that Karuna will be given amnesty." He also indicated that the LTTE continues to support the peace process, stating: "our leadership and our structures remain firmly committed to peaceful negotiations and the ceasefire agreement, and this isolated issue will not affect the peace initiative."

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Karuna remains Defiant

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14. (SBU) For his part, Karuna remains defiant in the face of his expulsion from the LTTE. Karuna, in an interview with a local newspaper, was quoted as stating: "We will not take orders from Prabhakaran." He also asserted that the LTTE had sent out "killer squads" in an effort to assassinate him. Karuna told the BBC that he was willing to return to the main LTTE organization if guarantees were given that eastern LTTE personnel would receive the same treatment as northern elements from now on. (Karuna has said his rebellion is based, in part, on his view that northern LTTE members do not respect members from the east.) Karuna also demanded the removal of several high-level officials serving LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran, including Intelligence Chief Pottu Aman. Numerous media reports also carried statements from Karuna's spokesman, Varathan, to the effect that the breakaway faction of the LTTE controlled by Karuna would function as an independent unit and would continue to observe the ceasefire "even though we are not a party to it." Varathan also said the LTTE's official statement of expulsion "lacked logic," as Karuna had already made a decision to leave the group. In a press report late on March 8, Varathan said the dissident faction of the Tigers controlled by Karuna would consider "a friendly partnership" with Prabhakaran, but he did not provide further details.

15. (C) Estimates vary wildly, but there may be as many as six thousand LTTE personnel in the eastern district who remain loyal to Karuna. (There are unconfirmed reports that the main LTTE organization may be preventing up to 600 eastern cadre who have been based in the north from returning to the east.) Karuna himself is said to be ensconced deep in bases in the Thoppigalla jungle located west of Batticaloa city. These long-time LTTE bases are said to be well-fortified. That said, it is not clear what financial resources Karuna's group has, and whether it has significant supplies of food and ammunition for the long haul.

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Heightened Tensions in East

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16. (SBU) While the majority of Mission's contacts in the east describe the situation there as calm for the most part, an underlying mood of tension has been developing since Karuna's defection from the main organization on March 3. Contacts at the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) confirm that at least two pro-Karuna protests took place in Batticaloa district on March 7. Effigies of Tiger leader V. Prabhakaran and newly appointed eastern commander Ramesh were burnt in both demonstrations. Pro-Karuna elements also sponsored a hartal (work stoppage) on March 8 in Tamil areas of Batticaloa and Ampara Districts that was successful in closing down some shops. In a related development, examinations have been postponed at Eastern University, located 20 kilometers south of Batticaloa city, and student housing at the Tamil-dominated university has been closed down and students told to leave.

17. (C) Although tensions are inching up, no violence has been reported. Contacts indicate a significant increase in the number of LTTE forces gathering in an area dividing Trincomalee District from Batticaloa District, however. Kurt Spur of the SLMM's Trincomalee office told poloff March 8 that there had been a "large increase" in the number of LTTE cadre gathered near the town of Verugal in this area. The forces in the Verugal area appear to be loyal to the main LTTE organization. It is not clear whether these forces plan to enter Batticaloa District in an attempt to oust Karuna. (There are reports that the main LTTE organization has arrested Pathuman, the political chief for Trincomalee. The reports are unconfirmed, but Pathuman may have been arrested because he is considered pro-Karuna.)

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GSL Takes "Hands-off" Policy

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18. (C) The Sri Lankan government appears to be sticking to a "hands off" policy regarding the LTTE crisis. Late March 5, Defense Secretary Cyril Herath rejected the idea of negotiating a separate ceasefire pact with Karuna's breakaway faction, stating in a press interview "when there is one ceasefire agreement signed between the Prime Minister and Prabhakaran, how can we have another?" (Per Ref D, Karuna had approached the Sri Lankan military last week and offered to negotiate a separate ceasefire accord for the east.) Karuna was reportedly not happy with this response from the GSL,

and was quoted as stating that if the government did not deal with his faction "I will be forced to display my strength." Despite reports to the contrary in the local press, the Sri Lankan military has said it is not on "high alert." Military spokesman Colonel Sumeda Perera told poloff March 8 that the military was closely monitoring the situation in the east, however.

¶9. (SBU) As of March 8, both President Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA) party and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) continue to remain virtually mum regarding the LTTE rift. In one of the few instances of comment on the Tiger situation by a political entity in the south, the Patriotic National Movement (PNM), an extremist Sinhalese group linked to the radical Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party, issued a statement on March 7. The statement alleged that the split in the LTTE presented an opportunity for the south to undermine the LTTE and perhaps destroy the group. The PNM asserted that the SLMM should not get in the middle of the situation and criticized the PM for not using the situation in a way that would break up the LTTE organization.

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Parliamentary Election Campaign continues

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¶10. (SBU) Against the backdrop of the recent developments in the Tiger organization, the campaign for Sri Lanka's upcoming April 2 parliamentary elections continues apace. President Kumaratunga and PM Wickremesinghe have been speaking in front of large rallies in various parts of the country. Candidates have also been engaged in canvassing in a normal fashion. Based on what Mission is hearing, campaigning continues in LTTE-influenced areas like Jaffna and Trincomalee. Some canvassing is reportedly even taking place in Batticaloa and Ampara Districts, though at a lower level than before the LTTE crisis. In other election-related developments, a team of election monitors from the European Union arrived in Sri Lanka on March 7. The leader of the EU's monitors, John Cushnahan, a senior European parliamentarian, is slated to arrive on March 10. The EU team will consist of roughly sixty monitors when it is fully on the ground (twenty are expected to arrive this coming weekend).

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COMMENT

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¶11. (C) The exact dimensions of Karuna's split from the main LTTE organization are as yet unclear. As touched on above, there are conflicting reports, for example, over whether the bulk of LTTE forces in the east remain loyal to Karuna, or to the main LTTE organization. Moreover, although it took the step to fire Karuna in a very public manner, it remains unclear whether the LTTE plans to move quickly to try to oust him (or worse), or to proceed more cautiously, perhaps because it does not yet have enough forces in place in the east to take action against him. In any case, Karuna's split from the main LTTE organization appears to be the most serious internal crisis ever faced by the group.

¶12. (C) If the situation is not resolved quickly, there will be implications for the peace process. In the near-term, there does not appear to be any serious threat to the informal peace process, though out-and-out warfare between rival LTTE factions could lead to serious complications in affected areas. In the longer term, however, the Norwegian facilitators will have their hands full monitoring the ceasefire accord and trying to resume peace talks if there are two de facto LTTE groups, one in the north and the other in the east.

END COMMENT.

¶13. (U) Minimize considered.

ENTWISTLE